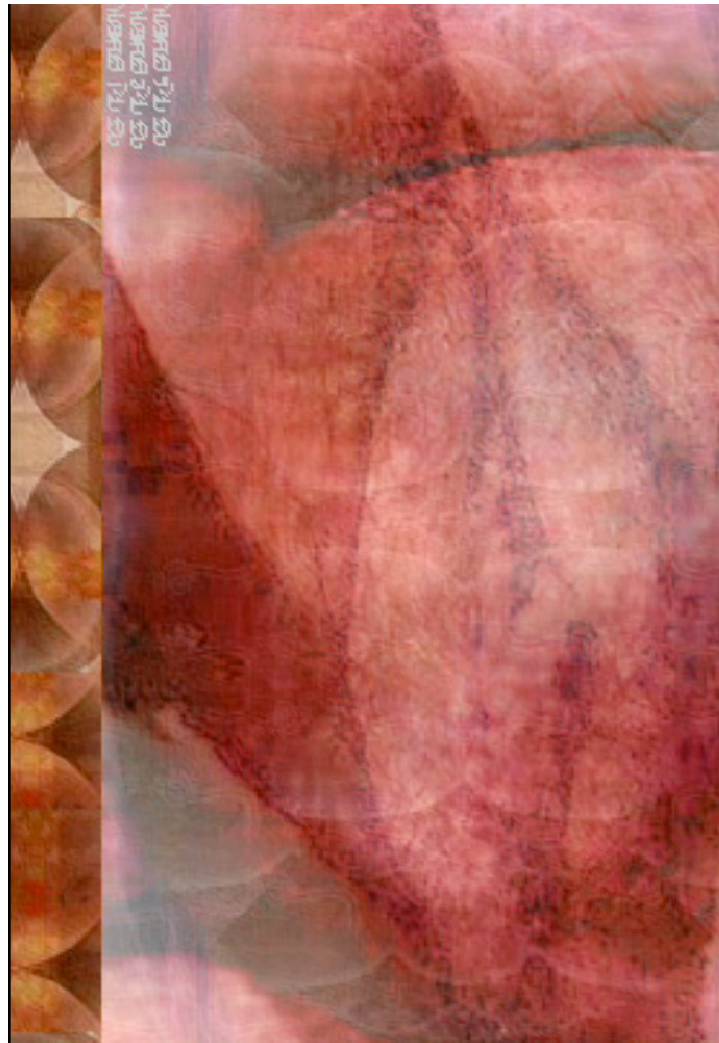


*A Capricious Discourse on Digital Representation and the Ecstatic
Potentiality of Electronic-Based Imagination*

by Joseph Nechvatal 2002 lecture at SVA & Alfred University



Compliant 2.0 Libidinal Bodies in the Bit-stream (Corpus Rotundum) 2001

To begin, I would say that the basic premise behind most all of electronic-based art today, either representational or abstract, is the hypothetical exploration of the introspective world of the imagination under the influence of today's high-frequency electronic/computerized environment. Moreover, that since it is difficult making sense of today's swirling phantasmagorical media society, the

general proposition behind electronic-based art may best be to look for a paradoxical summation of this uncertainty by taking advantage of today's superficial image saturation; a saturation so dense that it fails to communicate anything particular at all upon which we can concur - except perhaps its overall incomprehensible sense of ripe delirium - as the reproduction system pulses with higher and higher, faster and faster flows of digital data to the point of near hysteria.

Perhaps the result of this ripe information abundance is that the greater the amount of information that flows, the greater the uncertainty which is produced; at least for thinking, questioning people. So, the tremendous load of imagery/sound/text information digitally produced and reproduced all round us today ultimately seems to make less, not more, conventional sense. If accepted, this supposition, it seems to me, plays into the history of abstract art which teaches us that art may refuse to recognize all thought as existing in the form of representation, and that by scanning the spread of representation art may formulate an understanding of the laws that provide representation with its organizational basis. As a result, in my view, it is electronic-based art's onus to see what unconventional, paradoxical, summational, immaterial sense - in terms of the subjective world of the imagination - it might make of all this based on an appropriately decadent reading of our paradoxically material-based (yet electronically activated) social media environment.

Perhaps such a basically abstract artistic paradoxical/summational fancy would begin with the presumption that an information-loaded nuclear weapon has already exploded, showering us with bits of radioactive-like information bytes,

thus drastically changing the way in which we perceive and act - even in our private subconscious dream worlds. It is this internal, subconscious, paradoxical drama - this subconscious contradictory tension - which I find potentially interesting today as a subject specifically suitable for electronic-based art. But it must be remembered that electronic-based art resides in a field of perception (at once seamless and fragmented) which itself is made up of electronic/phantasmagoric energies corresponding to a new (and paradoxical) combination of space and time; an immersive perspective without horizon.

Electronic-based art, by virtue of its distinctive electron constitution and hence networked fluidity, floats in an extensive stratosphere of virtuality. Habitual values and expectations of solidity no longer are capable of existing ipso facto in technological virtuality. Indeed they must be imposed, if desired. Hence the particular constitution of electronic-based art is best seen, perhaps, as an osmotic membrane: a blotter of instantaneous ubiquity/proliferation. This summational view of electronic-based art results in the atomization and disintegration of what once was considered normality into immateriality as this delirious disintegration/merging yields up to art's scrutiny a ghostly conceptual panorama based on circulation. Consequently, electronic-based art reflects (and works with) de-centered prior social powers which previously existed in our civilization. But the world now, when viewed as shaped by de-centered electronic overload, is understood as only a flustered code of digital signifiers: a confused collective representation which bewilderingly continues to mutate the ideology of its own reproduction.

So, how can we artists symbolically turn these de-centered codes into artistic abstractions of social merit? Perhaps because we know that these symbolic codes (which, after all, helter-skelter, make us up) are positively phantasmagorical. If so, perhaps a socially relevant digitally-based creativity can be found in today's electronic-based art's ecstatic potentiality - in that electrons partake (and make up) the all-encompassing phantasmagorical/technological sign-field within which we live and which defines us (at least in part). Since prevailing representation is made up of conventional, rigid social signs (and art typically of unconventional irresponsible signs - the mode that represents the real arbitrary nature of all signs as it subverts the socially controlled system of meaning) - electronic-based art may offer us the opportunity for the creation of relevant and applicable anti-social phantasmagorical signs (hence abstract ecstatic anti-signs) which may continue to mentally move and multiply us without stop.

If the ultra-dissemination of the sign in electronic-based art may create phantasmagorical hyper-logics of use to the formation of art, electronic-based art's abstract potential may prove useful in questioning received notions of representation when viewed against assumptions of utility versus pleasure.

Electronic-based art already address previous analog art as an institution and transgresses conventional art's basic assumptions of uniqueness as it opens itself up to new spaces of malleable and combinatory sites - hence to a perpetual multiplication of significance creating hybrids of inferences. Digital compositions open up a territory of signification, then, towards the creation of hybrid decoded and deterritorialized phantasmagorical meanings. Meaning in art and in life then advances by seeing more clearly into its own underlying phantasmagorical

assumptions of excess, by facing up to the radical implications of those assumptions, and by purging itself from conventional ways of thinking. Thus perhaps electronic-based art's unconscious intention is to achieve an ultimate phantasmal integration by dissolving material form into its original imaginary foundation.

Such a dynamic sense of aesthetic electronica as contemplative vision might suggest the potential of social re-configuration then as it subsumes our previous world of simulation/representation into a phantasmagorical nexus of over-lapping linked hybrid observations of the outer world with precise extractions of human mentality. Encounters, then, with computer simulation, one may assume, might create an opportunity for social image transgression - and for a vertiginous ecstasy of thought. Surely such a hybrid electronica/phantasmal impetus can help release pent up ecstatic energies in that the more overwhelming and restrictive the social mechanism, the more exaggerated are the resulting effects - and hence excel the assumed determinism of the technological-based phenomenon inherent (supposedly) in our post-industrial information society. Therefore, this way, electronic-based art may serve as an ecstatic impulse/phenomena which proliferates in proportion to the technicization of society - as such an electronica-ecstasy may occur as a result of the technological society's obsession with the phantasmal character of electronic speed-proliferation.

Prediction: as human psychic energies are stifled and/or bypassed by certain controlling aspects of mass technology, such a hybrid/summarized ecstatic phenomena will increasingly break out in forms of art. Similarly, simulation technology (when used in the creation of electronica-based art) will promote an

indispensable alienation from the socially constructed self necessary for the outburst of such ecstatic experiences/acts. Inversely, electronic technology will enable the contemporary artist to express ecstatic reactions in ways never before possible. Thus, this ecstatic counteraction will provide a phantasmal defiance through transport aimed against the controlling world's blandness and self-destructiveness. This aesthetic philosophy will provide a fundamental antithesis to the authoritarian, mechanical, simulated rigidities of the controlling technical world.

Yet how more precisely might it be possible to excel the numbing equivalence brought on by the reproduction glut which reduces all difference to equivalence? I would suggest that perhaps beneath the established signs, and in spite of them, another, deeper, discourse which recalls a time of phantasmal consistency exists. Perhaps beneath the interplay of their precisely delineated distinctions, electronic-based art can bring a phantasmal similitude to the sign by loading all signs with a phantasmal homogeneous consistency that ultimately erases their assigned singularity.

If so, and as a result, the entire Western cultural episteme might be fundamentally rearranged and modified as signs cease to fulfill the function of revealing how the world is supposedly ordered. In phantasmal/hybrid understanding thought detaches itself from the order and authority of the old sign and topples down into the realm of imagination, of fantasy, and into non-knowledge - towards imagining questions rather than pat assigned answers. Yet this fancied aesthetic non-knowledge is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious area

of our current identity, as it is also the phantasmal depths from which all digital representation emerges in its precarious, but glittering, existence.

Here such electronic-based art helps us to understand that the "real world" is just made up of all the phantasmal images of materiality now disintegrating and recomposing via virtuality. Therefore, electronic-based art may be capable of composing new hybrid art from the disintegrating spread of digital signs found scattered throughout the space of computer memory. Through this articulation, digital grammar may appear as phantasmal semi-abstraction, because in electronic-based art the sign no longer consists only of representations but of hybrid signs that in turn represent other representations, and so on, as the links of phantasmal thought require. Too, it may consist of phantasmal digital elements, grouped into new spreading systems, which represent the distinguishing of material representations, and hence may possess characters which the eye can scan and identify only because they have a structure that is, in a way, the chimerical, dark, concave, inner-side of visibility. The conditions of these links reside outside of representation however, and inside of phantasmal abstract knowledge (beyond materialistic representation's immediate visibility) in a sort of behind-the-scenes immersive phantasmal world deep and dense enough that representation finds the point where visible forms are digitally joined together in the suppositious. Electronic-based art can perhaps help direct us towards that peak, that necessary but always inaccessible point, which dives down, beyond our gaze, towards the very aerial heart of things.

It is from this phantasmal depth that digital abstract representations come into being. Indeed it is this quivering phantasmal cohesion that maintains the sovereign

and secret sway over each and every sign - this phantasmal vibrating - which I find interesting and beyond reductive minimalist abstraction (thus into an excessive hybrid abstraction) in analyzing the potential for electronic-based art. The space of material-based representational order is from now on atomized into digital phantasmal and only its hidden chimerical veins are useful in constructing new, socially relevant, art; an art, which is in theory, opposed to the tabular space laid out by classical thought.

May I just say that this phantasmal flee from the play of materialistic-based representation has the most urgent political/social ramifications in our media saturated society. This, I think, well-founded but ambiguous phantasmal model for art indicates the capacity for the electronic media's worth as it provides the explication of the phantasmal links that abet communications as it expresses the laws of composition and decomposition that rule it.

Hence excessive abstraction can be, in a sense, the representation of all representation when it attempts to represent the unlimited field of representation, which non-utilitarian phantasmal ideology attempts to scrutinize in accordance with a non-discursive method which now appears as an abstract digital metaphysics; a metaphysics which excessive abstraction helps to step outside of itself to posit itself outside of the mechanics of uniform dogmatism.

The emergence of the spectral project I have outlined above will, I hope, contribute to the dissolution of the field of non-electronic representations by inventing an art in which what matters is no longer identities, or logos, or distinctive characters, but rather dense hidden phantasmagorical forces developed on the basis of inclusion -

where from now on things will be represented only from the depths of this inclusive ecstatic density withdrawn into itself, perhaps adumbrated and darkened by its obscurity, but bound tightly together and inescapably grouped by the vigor that is hidden down below in digital virtual deepness. Such dynamic abstract forms, and their connections, and the blank space that isolates them and surrounds their outline - all these will be presented to our gaze only in an already pre-decomposed digital vivacious state, already articulated in that insinuated nether darkness that is fermenting them towards a phantasmagorical visual discourse which is both capricious and, paradoxically, socially responsible.